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Pope Francis Meet Roy Bourgeois

Ken Briggs | Mar. 20, 2013 NCR Today

Pope Francis has so far embraced the cause of poor people and steered clear of church discipline and doctrine. His theme of mercy might imply that Catholics need it based on their disregard of moral teachings but he hasn't clearly said so.

If it turns out that the pope's devotion to alleviating poverty becomes his central concern, what would that mean for those Catholics who march to that drummer but dissent from the church's rules?

Enter Roy Bourgeois, a priest who risked life and limb protesting injustice in the cause of the poor at the School of the Americas and in Latin America. He also defied the Vatican's ban on publicly endorsing the ordination of women. For that he was stripped of his status as a Maryknoll priest.

If that case were to be decided by Pope Francis, which way would he go? Would Fr. Bourgeois' tireless opposition to training repressive South American militia outweigh his breaking of the rule on discussing women as priests? Or would his disloyalty to an official pronouncement over-rule his service to a mission whose aims seem compatible with the pope's own?

From the gathering evidence, the pope has neither the confrontational instincts of Oscar Romero nor the passivity of so many bishops under dictatorial regimes. The sketchy image of his past suggests a relatively quiet man who does what he can and isn't an enforcer of strict church law in the manner of is predecessor. He appears to respond benevolently in ways consistent with his character.

Would he have exonerated Roy Bourgeois? Would he stopped an attempt to investigate American nuns on grounds that whatever irregularities they might have displayed toward church regulations deserves to be set aside out of respect for their work with the poor?

Up to now, Francis has been the apostle of good will, suggesting a live-and-let-live attitude toward non-conforming Catholics. But unless and until he directly speaks to those issues, and makes decisions based on his priorities, he will hold the potential for weighing cases like those of Roy Bourgeois and the American nuns on different scales.

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